

Which English and Whose Cultures Should Be Taught To Empower Our Students?

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Abstract

Tomlinson(2010) states that learners of English all over the world are being tested on a variety of English they do not and never will speak. He further emphasizes that the students are being tested on British and American English and not on Singaporean English or Brazilian English or the International English that they speak.

Indeed, language and culture are two sides of a coin. The teaching of language cannot be divorced from the teaching of culture. With the emergence of the notion "World Englishes", it is high time to reconsider which English and whose culture should be taught and introduced to our students. It is the duty of English teachers to determine which English and whose culture to be taught. It is a waste of time, energy, and money to teach a variety of English that has nothing to do with the future life of our students.

The paper tries to discuss about the cultural aspects that should be introduced to our English classes. It is hoped that English teachers realize about the kind of English needed by the students.

Keywords: variety of English, native, culture

1. Introduction

It is commonly believed that now there are many people around the world who speak English as a second language than the number of native speakers of it. Xu (2010) estimates that 350 million Chinese are currently learning English and, as a result, it is predicted that the development of a variety of English with Chinese characteristics may be obvious. On March 1, 2003 the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) of Japan published a document titled "Regarding the establishment of an action plan to cultivate "Japanese with English abilities". In South Korea, President Lee MyungBak initiated and strengthened the use of English as a medium of instruction in certain districts. The purpose was to enable student to be comfortable speaking with English-speaking foreigner without taking extra classes at private institutions. In Indonesia, English has been taught

for more than 9 years. Even some kindergartens introduce English to their toddlers. Recently, the government of Indonesia initiated *Rintisan Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional (RSBI)* and *Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional (SBI)* in some provinces. The medium of instruction in those schools is English. There is no doubt that English has gained much popularity around the globe. Graddol (1997) stated that the majority use of English are now outside the English-speaking West. Thus, it is obvious that the number of English users outside the so called BANA (Britain, Australasia and North America) area is much bigger than those in BANA.

1. Which English to empower our students?

Holliday (2005) states that BANA people come from the English-speaking West and are characterized as having an overactive professional zeal connected with the notion that English and English teaching is originally *theirs*. They feel that they are the custodians of English. Sir Randolph Quirk is one of the scholars who always tries to persuade English teachers and learners all over the world to believe that they will never be successful without the help of native speakers. According to him, there is one standard English, which is British English. Most language teachers as well as students accept the idea and believe that their goal is to become as similar to the native speaker as possible.

However, Cook (2008) poses an interesting question; *which native speakers*. He further explains that language comes in many varieties, according to country, region, class, sex, profession and other factors. England itself contains a variety of class and regional accents. It should be noted that all the English-speaking countries have their own variety. Which of these native speakers should the students adopt as a role model?

Medgyes (1992) highlights several drawbacks of native speakers. Firstly, they are not models of L2 users. Secondly, they cannot talk about L2 language learning strategies from their own experience. Thirdly, they are often not explicitly aware of the features of the language as much as non-native speakers are. Fourthly, they cannot anticipate learning problems. Fifthly, they cannot empathize with their students' learning experience. Last but not least, they are not able to exploit the learners' first language.

Widdowson (1998) makes a strong point that needs to be taken into account by English teachers around the world. He states:

How English develops in the world is no business whatever of native speakers in England. The United States, or anywhere else.... The very fact that English is an international language means that *no nation* can have the custody over it.... But the point is that it is only international to the extent that it is not their language. It is not a possession which they lease out to others, while still retaining the freehold. Other people actually own it (p.244-245).

It seems that we need to take stand of our position regarding which English and whose culture should be introduced and taught to empower our students. It is our duty as a teacher to make sure that the kind of English learnt by our students should be the one related to

the roles that they will assume when using English. If the students want to work in Singapore, then it is the duty of the teacher to introduce them to the English used in Singapore. If they want to work in China, then, introduce them to the English used in China.

Thus, it is important for us to learn from Japan and Israel in designing our English syllabus. The Japanese syllabus emphasizes a goal of "Japanesewith English Abilities", not imitation of native speaker (MEXT, 2003). Similarly, the Israeli curriculum " does not take on the goal of producing near -native speakers of English, but rather speakers of Hebrew, Arabic or other languages, who can function comfortably in English whenever it is appropriate " (*English-Curriculum for all Grades,2002*).

Kachru(2006) suggests two models for teaching English in world Englishes classrooms namely polymodel and monomodel. He further stated that: "In discussing English as an international and intranational language it is difficult to raise the question of choice of model. The local, national, and international uses of English...raise questions about the validity of *didactic* models, those which emphasize a monomodel approach to the teaching of English. One has to be realistic about such questions and aim at a *dynamic* approach, based on a *polymodek* concept. The choice of a model cannot be separated from the functions of language."

The use of World Englishes in the classroom is representative of Kachru's idea of the polymodel. The purpose of this model is to make the students aware of and tolerant of different varieties of world Englishes, including national varieties.

2. What is culture?

The concept of "culture" is not easy to define. Many different definitions have been offered to describe culture. Hofstede (2010:5) defines culture as mental software. According to him, a person behavior is partially determined by his/her mental program; he or she has a basic ability to deviate from them and react in ways that are new, creative, destructive, or unexpected. He stated that culture is always a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live within the same social environment. He further explained that culture us learned, not innate. It derives from one's social environment rather than one's genes. Individuals cannot be categorized into one cultural category and it is very common for individuals to have dual or even multiple cultural, ethnic, linguistic belongings as well as nationalities. This can change throughout one's lifetime. Chastain (1976:388) divides culture into two categories namely "capital C culture" and "small c culture". The "capital C culture" refers to the economic, social and political history, and the great politicians, heroes, writers, artists of the country. While "the small c culture" refers to the way of thinking, habits, customs, traditions of a society. The definitions given by those two experts are adopted in this paper.

3. Whose culture should be taught?

Language is closely related to culture. There is a good example to show how culture influences the way people think and behave. One day in 1997, Korean air Flight was heading for a landing at Guam Airport. Even though the pilot had landed at this airport

many times in the past, he forgot that there was a hill blocking the approach to the runway. He flew the plane right to it, killing 228 people. That was one of eight crashes over 20 years for Korean Air, which at time held the worst safety record of any airline. A writer named Malcolm Gladwell was invited to analyze the problem and he found the core of the problem; the Korean cultural tendency to be extremely polite to their superiors. Both of the first officer and the flight officer had recognized the danger signs, but they could not bring themselves to confront the pilot directly or take control of the plane. This problem could be solved when he required everyone in Korean Air's cockpit to speak English. Without deferential forms of addressed used in Korean-that might be useful in other contexts-the crew was able to speak more directly, and as a result, Korean Air becomes one of the best safety records in the world.

The above example shows that culture is indeed closely related to the language being used. They are two sides of a coin. Then the question is; *whose culture* should be taught to English learners in Indonesia. Learners in Indonesia simply do not see themselves in the texts they are using. What they often see is an alien world of Australian, British, Canadian or US characters in unfamiliar settings. Even the teachers themselves are not familiar with the topics discussed in many textbooks.

With the emergence of World Englishes proposed by Kachru (2002), we need to reconsider the role of English and the culture that should be taught to empower our students. He stated that : " The current linguistic profile of English may be viewed in terms of three concentric circles.....The inner circle refers to the traditional cultural linguistic bases of English (e.g. Britain, USA, Australia). The outer circle represents the institutionalized non-native varieties (ESL) in the regions that have passed through extended periods of colonization (e.g. Singapore, India, Nigeria).....The expanding circle includes the regions where the performance varieties of the language are used essentially in EFL contexts (e.g. China, Japan, Indonesia).

There is no doubt that English is now a lingua franca. A lingua franca is defined as "a language that is used for communication between different groups of people, each speaking a different language" (Richardset al/as cited in Simpson). Clayton (cited in Simpson, 2011) shows the situation in Cambodia as an example. In Cambodia, English is essential for most jobs with foreign agencies, and even French-run non-governmental organizations (NGOs) now require English. This post-Anglophone role of English is reflected in the following quotation from a Cambodian ministry official. "You know, when we use English, we do not think about the United States or England. We only think about the need to communicate". English as a lingua franca is obviously plays an important role in the modern world. ASEAN countries agreed to adopt English as the only working language when they signed the ASEAN Charter in 2009.

Based on the explanation above, I would like to propose three suggestions regarding the culture that should be introduced in our English classes. Firstly, English should be used as a means of introducing the richness of Indonesian cultures. Secondly, the cultures of our close neighboring countries should also be introduced by means of English. Thirdly, if it is possible,

English teachers need to introduce the students to the cultures in which they are going to work or live.

4. What to teach

Chastain (1976) presents her modes of presenting culture in terms of "in class" and "out of class". Her principles for presenting culture "in class" can be summarized as follows:

- The culture aside which is an unplanned, brief, cultural comment.
- Culture assimilators consisting of ; (1) a short passage demonstrating an intercultural exchange in which misunderstanding occurs,(2) possible interpretations of what happens, (3) feedback for the student
- Culture capsule which is a brief discussion of one aspect the second culture followed by a discussion of the contrast between the two cultures
- Minidrama is an approach where the students incorporate the culture being learnt into their actions as they perform in selected situations.
- Newspapers and magazines usually provide some cultural contents. Teachers can ask the students to survey articles on popular clothing styles, movies, TV programmes etc. Based on the information the students get from the newspapers and magazines, they get prepare a report or do independent projects
- Bulletin board can also be used to place pictures and artwork of other cultures
- Visual aids such as films, slides, photos, etc
- Music and dance of the second culture can also be introduced.

Regarding the "out if class", Chastain suggests the following ones:

- Pen pals and tapes exchanges.
- Special programmes and events
- Community resources
- Summer camps
- Student exchange and travel/study abroad.
- Regional and state language festivals.

I deliberately choose the suggestion proposed by Chastain to show that the idea of presenting culture has been around for many years. With the progress of information and technology, it should be much easier for us to introduce our students to a variety of cultures from around the world.

5. Conclusion and Suggestion

For many years, we have been teaching and testing our students with a variety of English that do not and will never use in their future life. It is a waste of time, money and energy. Thus, it is high time we introduced our students with a more realistic situation regarding the role of English. Tomlison (in Kirpatrick,2010) states that students need to be taught and tested about the varieties of English which the learners are more likely to need to communicate in. He provides an illustration about the situation in Nigeria. If Nigerian secondary school learners are going to use English with other Nigerian speakers of English

then it follows that it is very important that they are able to communicate in educated Nigerian English. If Nigerian businessmen are going to use English mainly to communicate with other non-native speakers, they will need competence in English as an International language. In brief, it is important for English teachers to teachers Englishes related the roles that will be assumed by the students when using it. No doubt that it is challenging for teachers as they have to upgrade themselves inexorably.

Regarding the teaching of culture, it is important for the teacher to introduce the students to know and understand their own culture, the culture of the close neighboring countries, and the culture of the people in other part of the world. In order to do this, the principles proposed by Chastain can be used and adapted in accordance with the situation.

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Biography

Ridwan Arif Nugroho graduated from the Teachers' Training College in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. He pursued his education in the Graduate School of Education at Yokohama National University, Japan under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), Japan. He earned his MA degree from Ming Chuan University, the Republic of China. He can be contacted at : ridwanarifnugroho@gmail.com